

52 - Christmas a Church Practice?

by Ben Torrey

Ben Torrey explores the historical and theological significance of Christmas as a church practice, emphasizing the light of Christ and the importance of the incarnation.

Duration: 8:43

Scripture: John 1:1

Topics: "Christmas"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the significance of Jesus as the light of the world. The sermon begins by quoting the Gospel of John, highlighting that all things were made by Jesus and that he is the source of life and light for humanity. The preacher also mentions the role of John the Baptist as a witness to the light. The sermon then shifts to the celebration of Jesus' birth, particularly during the darkest time of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. The preacher explains that Jesus' incarnation represents God identifying with human weakness and poverty, ultimately leading to our salvation. The sermon concludes by discussing the tradition of baptizing new converts on the eve of the resurrection, symbolizing their entrance into new life through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Transcript

Merry Christmas, everyone. I wonder how many regular listeners are tuned in tonight. I'm actually back in the U.S. for a few weeks, having recorded this broadcast before leaving.

For me, about this time on Christmas Eve, I would be relaxing with our family and getting ready for our midnight Christmas Eve service. I know that many churches in Korea have services on Christmas morning, as do many churches in the U.S. However, we have ours at night. This is actually a very ancient practice, still followed by many denominations around the world.

In the Hebrew calendar, the day starts with sunset and ends the following day at sunset. So by that measure, it is already Christmas. In following that pattern, the ancient church celebrated a great feast like Christmas and Easter, beginning after sundown the day before.

This is still true for much of the church today. So anyway, it is Christmas, the second most important day in the church calendar. A lot of people think of Christmas as being the most important, but it is only second because the feast of the resurrection is the more important of the two.

In fact, for a long time in the earliest days of the church, Christmas wasn't celebrated at all, while the resurrection was remembered every year at Passover, which is the name for the feast in Latin, Spanish, Italian, and French, Pascha. The Hebrew is Pesach. In Korean, it is called Resurrection Day, Puhajja, a very good name.

But in English, we actually use an old Norse pagan name, Easter. That name is related, I believe, to the ancient pagan goddess Ishtar. I don't like Easter, so I always try to call it the feast of the resurrection like Koreans do.

Anyway, back to celebrating Christmas. By the way, the word Christmas is a very good name for this day, also known as the feast of the nativity, that is, the birth. And we all know it is the birth of Jesus Christ that we celebrate.

Christmas is short for Christ Mass, or the communion service of the Christ. Sorry to keep going off subject tonight, but I guess it's just that sort of evening. As I was saying, the earliest church did not celebrate the birth of Christ, only his resurrection.

However, as time went by, there arose a need to have a celebration roughly half a year separate from Passover. I'll tell you why a little later. So, as people saw the need to have another celebration, the natural choice was the celebration of our Lord's birth, which they did on January 6th.

Wait a minute, Christmas is December 25th, isn't it? Yes, it is for most of us here in Korea and throughout the Western Church. Remember, the Korean Protestant and Catholic churches are actually both from the ancient Western Church. However, many of the Eastern churches still celebrate Christmas on January 6th.

But for others, January 6th is the Feast of the Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas, which is remembered in the West as the day the wise men arrived in Bethlehem, and in the East as the day celebrating the baptism of Jesus. In both cases, it remembers Jesus being revealed to the as the Son of God. Epiphany means revelation.

So, where did December 25th come into the picture? Well, that was actually in response to another popular desire. You see, in Old Rome, December 25th was called Dies Natalis Solis Invicti, the birthday of the unconquered sun. The winter solstice is December 22nd, the shortest day of the year.

To the ancients, it appeared that the sun was losing ground to the darkness, but by December 25th, it was clear that the sun was coming back and the days were growing longer again. This was a very popular time of celebration, following closely on the carnival-like celebration of Saturn, the Saturnalia, that ran from December 17th to the 23rd. For many of the ordinary people of Rome, December 25th had much more meaning than January 6th.

So, the celebration of Christmas was switched over to then. It was also pointed out that we really are celebrating the Son of Righteousness, who rises with healing in his rays, see Malachi 4.2, and who was unconquered by death. Actually, the Church has done this sort of thing a number of times through the centuries, taking a popular pagan festival, adopting it as Christian, and giving it a new but related meaning.

There is a large difference of opinion about whether or not this is a good thing, but I'll let you decide. In any case, that is how we wound up celebrating our Lord's birth tonight and tomorrow. But clearly, none of this

has anything to do with when Jesus was really born, right? Right.

There are two very good candidates for when Jesus was born, and I have read excellent defenses of both. One is on or about the Feast of Tabernacles, which, as you may remember from an earlier broadcast, corresponds precisely with Juzok. And the other is Passover.

Actually, I think the Spring Feast of Passover may be the more likely period. It strikes me as very appropriate for God to begin the work of the Incarnation on the day celebrating deliverance from slavery and to complete it on that same day with the Resurrection, 33 years later. However, regardless of when Jesus was actually born, I really do enjoy celebrating His birth at Christmas with my family.

It is a very warm, cozy, and joyful time. And for those of us who live in the Northern Hemisphere, it is wonderful to have the special celebration of the light coming into the world when the nights are the darkest, the coldest, and the longest. At the midnight service, we do not read Luke's account of the birth of Jesus.

That is read at an earlier service or on Christmas Day in the morning. We read instead the first 14 verses of the Gospel of John. Let me read you John 1, verses 1 to 9, right now.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

The same came for a witness to bear witness of the light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that light, but was sent to bear witness of that light. That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

This is a celebration of the light. Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the light of the world. What a joyful thing to celebrate! He came into the world in the weakest, most defenseless way, a poverty-stricken, homeless baby whose first bed was where animals ate.

This is the incarnation. This is what it means for God to become man. This is what it means to identify with our weakness.

He became one with us in all our weakness and poverty, that we might become one with Him in all His glory and victory. As Saint Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:21, He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. And this brings us back around to why the Church wanted to add another day of celebration along with Passover slash resurrection.

It became the custom to baptize new converts on the eve of the resurrection, to symbolize that through baptism they were entering into the new birth, the new life gained for them by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As more and more people were added to the Church, they did not want to wait all year long until the next resurrection day to baptize them. So they thought, well, let's celebrate Jesus' birth and the light coming into the world, conquering death and darkness as a time for baptisms.

So they did. To me, it's all really special how everything comes full circle. All of it is part of the glorious story of our salvation.

Have a wonderful and joyful Christmas. Good night.

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